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TRIM BEHIND THE FOOTLIGHTS

OR, THE HOLD UP AT THE CASINO.

By the Author of "Nick Carter"

THE MAN ON THE STAGE THREW BOTH ARMS INTO THE AIR, STAGGERED AND FELL FULL LENGTH.

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CHAPTER I.

WRECKED BY DYNAMITE.

"Trim."

"Well, governor?"

Nick Carter spoke sharply.

The young detective felt that there was something of unusual importance back of his chief's tone.

He jumped from his chair and approached the table where Nick was sitting.

"Have you read the morning papers, Trim?"

"Just this minute going through them, sir."

As he spoke Trim held up one of the New York dailies.

Nick glanced at it.

"Have you read the dispatches from Mexico?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"You'll find one of them on the sixth page, fourth column.

"It's dated from Puebla.

"Read it."

Trim turned to page six of the paper he was holding and ran his eyes down the fourth column.

About midway he came to this dispatch.

"Dynamite outrage.

"Wealthy Mexican attacked in his office——

"Seriously and perhaps fatally injured.

"Puebla, Mex., July —.

"Great excitement prevails here on account of an attempt to kill General Maximo Blanco, one of the wealthiest men in this city.

"General Blanco was in his office alone so far as anybody knows when a terrific explosion took place directly over his head.

"His room was completely wrecked.

"Desks and tables were smashed to kindlings and a part of the wall fell out into the street.

"The general himself was bruised all over his body.

"It is miraculous that he escaped instant death.

"He still lives, but he is unconscious, and it is believed that his chances for recovery are very slight.

"The affair is shrouded in mystery.

"There is little doubt that the explosion was deliberately planned, but by whom and for what purpose cannot be guessed.

"It is supposed that the explosive was

dynamite because that material makes it force felt downward.

"Nothing but a few broken beams is left of the ceiling of General Blanco's room.

"The roof above, however, is comparatively uninjured.

"There was great confusion in the building and on the street near by immediately after the exposion.

"It is said that several masked men were seen.

"If so, they disappeared promptly.

"The wildest rumors are afloat.

"So many people feared that there was to be a general outbreak that bunsineess was suspended during the rest of the day.

"Nothing further has happened, however, to cause alarm.

"Although excitement still prevails the city is comparatively quiet."

Trim laid down the paper.

"Have you read it?" asked Nick.

"Yep."

"What do you think of it?"

"The information in the newspaper isn't clear enough for the making of a theory."

"Right you are, my boy, unless you happen to know more about it than the newspaper tells."

"I expect to know a good deal more."

"Do you?"

"Cert."

"Why?"

"Because you've asked me to read it, and because there's something in the tone of your voice that says you're going to talk about it."

Nick smiled.

"And you think that means that I know it all?" he said.

"Well, you know more than I do."

"Perhaps, but not so much as I expect you to learn."

"Are you going to send me down there?"

"Yes."

The great detective was looking over a number of letters.

Presently he took up one and said:

"Here is a letter that came in this morning's mail.

"It is from the Mexican consul in this city.

"I won't read it all, for the consul uses more words than are necessary to say what he wishes to.

"The point is this:

"The explosion described in the newspaper took place yesterday forenoon.

"Some time in the afternoon it seems that Antonio Perez, who is the private secretary of General Blanco, sent a long telegraphic dispatch in cipher to the consul.

"I suppose Perez used cipher because the excitement down there is so great that everybody was suspected, and he didn't dare to trust even a telegraph operator with the knowledge of what he was doing.

"The consul has translated the cipher and enclosed it in his letter.

"After describing the explosion substantially as the newspaper account has it, Perez adds:

"'The general is unconscious and if he lives it will be as a hopeless paralytic.

"'The doctors don't think he will ever speak again or move his limbs freely.

"'I have been with him so long and know him so well that I am sure I know what he would do if he were himself.

"'He would spend a fortune, if necessary, in investigating this affair and bringing the scoundrels who did the deed to justice.

"'I know, too, that under such circumstances, General Blanco would turn to New York's great detective for help.

"'I, therefore, ask you to put this information before Nicholas Carter.

"'Assure him that the family of General Blanco will cheerfully meet any expense that may be necessary to solving this terrible mystery.

"'Let us hear from him through you whether he accepts the case or not.'"

Nick laid down the letter and looked at Trim.

"You accept it of course?" said the latter.

"I sent my reply to the consul immediately after reading the letter.

"I told him to notify Perez that I accepted the case and to urge Perez not to mention that fact to anybody in Puebla."

"It isn't likely," Trim remarked, "that Perez sent that dispatch without consulting with other persons."

"Without a doubt."

"Therefore, I don't see how it will be possible to prevent people down there from knowing that a detective is going to work on the matter."

"Even so, Trim, it will be better to keep our movements as dark as possible."

At this moment a servant entered with a telegram that he handed to Nick.

"There is no answer," said Nick, when he had read it.

The servant withdrew and the great detective remarked:

"You were more than right when you said that the knowledge of our working on the case could not be kept dark there."

"Is that dispatch from Puebla?"

"It is."

Nick passed it over and Trim read:

"Nicholas Carter, Esq., New York:

"As a business man of Peubla, I earnestly hope you will undertake the matter that Antonio Perex has telegraphed you about.

"All here will support you.

"Arthur Jameson."

"Who is Jameson?" asked Trim.

"I know no more than you.

"You will probably find that he is a merchant of high standing with whom Perez has consulted."

"His dispatch doesn't require an answer and when you get to Puebla you can decide whether to make yourself known to him or not."

"Did you say," asked Trim, "that the cipher dispatch from Perez doesn't give any more information than is found in the newspaper?"

"That was what I said.

"You may take the dispatch with you for reference if you like, but I'm going to tell you something that in my opinion may throw a good deal of light on the affair."

CHAPTER II.

EUROPE'S GREAT CRIMINAL.

Trim was all attention.

He had expected something of this kind from the beginning.

"About a year ago," Nick began, "I received a letter from a London detective.

"He's a man whom I have known for many years.

"More than once we have given each other lifts on cases.

"In fact, neither of us waits for the other to ask for assistance.

"If I know of anything that I think may be useful to him I send him word about it.

"He does the same with me.

"His name is Brodhead, and if you were going to England I should send you to him for points.

"As it is, you're going to Mexico and Brodhead's points may be of use to you.

"His letter to me was a long one and chiefly about a criminal known as Jan the Destroyer."

"It is believed that he's a Russian, but even that is in doubt.

"His full name, if we know it aright, is Jan Luboff, but he speaks many languages and has traveled everywhere.

"Therefore his name may not be Luboff, and he may not be a Russian, but that is of little consequence.

"The fact is that for years he defied the police of Europe.

"His crimes were of the most daring character.

"He turned up in the most unexpected and surprising way at all sorts of places.

"The police of Moscow might be looking for him and thinking that they were just about to get their grip on him, when word would come that he had just completed some crime in Paris.

"Then the French police would throw themselves into fits about him.

"They would fill their police stations with suspected persons.

"Everybody who was not positively known would have to endure the tortures of a French magistrate's examination.

"One by one all the suspects would prove alibis, or in some other way clear themselves.

"At last the police would be on the point of fixing upon some stranger who must surely be the terrible Jan, and all their plans would go up in smoke, for the rascal would be heard from in Copenhagen or Glasgow, or some equally distant city."

"He must be a genius of crime," remarked Trim.

"He is and it will be a great thing for

the reputation of any policeman or detective who captures him.

"There's a pirce on his head in Russia and I think that in several other European cities of consequence there is a large reward offered for his capture and conviction of one or other offense."

"What is this man's specialty?" asked Trim.

"I don't think he has one.

"I think he would do anything from picking your handkerchief out of your pocket to blowing up an empire.

"He got his nickname, 'The Destroyer,' from one of the first crimes traced to him.

"This, as it happened, was an unsuccessful crime, but the fact that he planned it brought it almost to a success, and then escaped the clutches of the police, is proof of his wonderful ability.

"This crime was connected with the crowning of the czar at Moscow.

"Jan had undermined a street along which the czar was to pass and had crammed the tunnel with explosives.

"If that magazine had been touched off the present czar would have lost his job and Russia would have had to look for a new ruler."

"Jan is a Nihilist, then?"

"I doubt it.

"I think he used the Nihilists on that occasion and pretended to be one of them, but my opinion is that he is simply a criminal.

"Plenty of poor Russians who may have been Nihilists, and who may not, were sent to Siberia on account of that plot, but Jan escaped.

"Like enough, more crimes are laid to his door than he is really guilty of, but there is one that Brodhead is quite certain was committed by the same man who attempted to blow up the czar.

"Among the big moneyed men of London is a private banker named Solomon.

"He has his offices in George Yard, a little narrow court off Lombard street.

"His offices consist of several rooms up two flights of stairs.

"One of these is his private room in which he see callers who are after loans.

"He was in this private office one morning making an arrangement to lend a man fifty thousand pounds.

"The borrower had to have the money in cash.

"I believe it was to be paid out at once, but that doesn't matter.

"The fact is that Solomon's check for the amount would not do.

"The Bank of England's notes would, and so the banker told his man to call in the course of half an hour and receive the notes.

"The man went out and Solomon sent a messenger with his check to get the necessary money.

"The messenger had hardly gone when a stranger stepped into Solomon's private office.

"Solomon looked up in surprise, for the stranger had not been announced by an office boy.

"The banker's surprise became alarm when the caller coolly bolted the door by which he had entered.

"This made it impossible for anybody to come in from the outer office without battering the door down.

"Solomon suspected trouble, of course, and reached his hand toward a bell rope.

"This communicated with a front office and was only used to give a singal in case of any trouble just like this.

"The banker got his hand on the bell rope, but he didn't pull it.

"The stranger had quietly drawn a revolver.

"He didn't aim it at Solomon, but there was something so threatening in the way that he laid it upon a mantel and leaned against the wall near it that the banker hesitated.

"'What do you want?' Solomon asked in a voice hardly above a whisper.

"'Fifty thousand pounds, if you please,' returned the caller, politely.

"The perspiration started upon Solomon's brow and his fingers quivered upon the bell rope.

"'I'd let go of that thing if I were you,' remarked the caller.

"'You're so nervous that without meaning to do so you might ring the bell, and if that should happen——'

"He stroked the barrel of the revolver gently as if he were rubbing a cat.

"Solomon was all of a tremble.

"He took his fingers hastily away from

the bell rope and tried to pull himself together for the sake of gaining time.

"It occurred to him that if this man could be kept there talking until the messenger should arrive with the money, that then an alarm might be given without endangering his own life.

"The stranger said nothing, but stood by the mantel motionless and smiling.

"'I haven't any money for you,' said Solomon, huskily.

"'Quite true,' returned the caller, 'but in a few minutes you will have.'

"It seemed evident that the caller knew something about Solomon's business arrangements.

"It was equally evident that he was waiting for that messenger to return.

"Still thinking to gain time, Solomon remarked:

"'Fifty thousand pounds is too much.'

"'Not when the security is good,' returned the caller, calmly.

"'But you offer no security,' retorted the banker, gaining a little courage when he saw that the man was not violent in language.

"'I offer you the best in the world,' was the reply.

"'What is it?' asked the banker.

"Solomon really began to think that he could handle this man.

"It seemed to him that perhaps the caller was a lunatic who could be led into an argument until he was off his guard and then be disarmed.

"The banker was shown his mistake quickly.

"'My security is your life,' the caller said.

"Then after he had given Solomon a moment or two in which to grow very uncomfortable, he went on:

"'Nothing is dearer to any man than his life, Mr. Solomon, and you would give up twice fifty thousand pounds if you had it within reach to avoid instant death.

"'Your life isn't worth anything like that amount to me, but to you it is worth all you've got.

"'As it happens fifty thousand pounds is about the limit at this minute and I shall be satisfied with that.

"'Just look around you, Mr. Solomon.'

"The caller waved his hand toward a window at the banker's back.

"Solomon dared not turn his head.

"He kept his eyes fixed upon his caller.

"The latter took the revolver from the mantel, cocked it and pointed it straight at the banker.

"'I told you to look around,' he said.

"Solomon turned hastily.

"The window looked out upon the roof of an adjoining building.

"It was a building of irregular shape and at the further side was another that rose two stories higher.

"Just across this roof and about twenty feet from him was a window of the further building.

"This window was provided with a heavy wooden shutter, and at this moment the shutter was part way open.

"Standing behind that shutter so that he would be concealed from view from every point except the point where Solomon sat, was a masked man.

CHAPTER III.

NICK SEES JAN'S HAND AT PUEBLO.

"He stood with arms folded and motionless.

"The mask was nothing more than a perfectly black piece of cloth, or pasteboard, with holes cut for the eyes.

"There was something so awfully mysterious in this that Solomon shuddered.

"'You must be mad,' he exclaimed, with something like a groan.

"Saying this, he turned his eyes again toward the caller.

"The latter had taken a card from his pocket which he tossed upon a tablet.

"'Permit me,' he said, 'to give you my name.

"'I've already stated my business.'

"The card read:

"'Jan Luboff, alias The Destroyer.

"'Late of Moscow, Paris, Berlin, etc.'

"Whether the name was known to Solomon or not, I cannot say.

"He may never have heard of this criminal's daring deeds, but the nickname, 'the Destroyer,' was enough to give him a fresh scare.

"'Look out of the window again,' said Jan.

"As he said this, Jan waved his arm to

the man who stood in the shadow of the blind.

"When Solomon turned he saw that this man was stirring.

"He didn't move from the place where he stood, but he let down his arms.

"The banker then saw that in his left hand the man carried what looked like a short section of gas pipe.

"Something was sticking from the end of it.

"The man drew a match upon the shutter and held it burning in his other hand.

"'My God!' gasped Solomon, 'it's a bomb and he's going to light the fuse.'

"Jan made another motion toward the man, who immediately dropped the match, stepped up it and again folded his arms.

"'It is a bomb,' remarked Jan, quietly, 'of most modern make and tremendously powerful.

"'If things don't go well, Mr. Solomon, he'll hurl that bomb into this window.'

"'Your messenger is about to return bringing with him fifty thousand pounds in Bank of England notes.

"'He'll place them upon the table before you and retire.

"'I will then take them.

"'If you make the slightest outcry, or give any alarm, my friend on the roof will hurl his bomb.'

"'The bomb will kill you, too,' chattered Solomon.

"'You don't seem to understand,' returned Jan, coolly, 'that I have looked out for that.

"'Take your handkerchief, Mr. Solomon, and wipe the perspiration from your face; it makes you look nervous.'

"Jan had his hand upon the bolt of the door.

"The revolver was in his other hand, but concealed from view.

"The banker knew where it was.

"He mopped his face as ordered and Jan drew the bolt.

"The next moment the messenger entered and laid a sealed valise up the table.

"'Anything more, sir,' the messenger asked.

"The banker was too scared to say anything, but he shook his head.

"Meantime Jan stood leaning carelessly against the mantel.

"The messenger then withdrew and Jan said:

"'Break the seal.'

"Solomon gave one glance toward the bell rope and another at the figure of the man on the roof.

"The latter now stood with the bomb and a match in his hands ready for business.

"With a sigh of despair, Solomon broke the seal upon the valise and took out a parcel of perfectly new Bank of England notes.

"'We won't take the trouble to count them,' remarked Jan, reaching forward and taking the parcel from Solomon's hands.

"'I've usually found that the Bank of England clerks are very accurate.

"'I'm greatly pleased that our little affair has gone so smoothly.

"'I only hope that the next time I call you will have double the amount at your command.

"'I wish you a very good day.'

"Jan thereupon opened the door and immediately after he had closed it behind him the banker heard a key turn in the lock.

"For a moment he sat motionless, not daring to stir.

"He wanted to clutch the bell rope and give the alarm to the front office before Jan had had time to pass out.

"He dared not because of that terirlbe figure upon the roof behind him.

"So he sat there, just how long he cannot tell, but for several seconds at least.

"At last he gave a frightened glance toward the window on the roof behind him.

"The masked man had disappeared.

"Even then Solomon didn't dare to yank the bell cord.

"Every second he feared that some movement of his would bring on the terrible calamity.

"Nothing would have surprised him less than the sudden destruction of the entire building.

"Trembling like a leaf, he got up and went to his own window.

"He threw it open and looked all around.

"There was no sign of the masked man or any other person who might be a confederate of Jan's.

"At last, with the courage of desperation, he yanked the bell cord.

"Immediately there was the hurrying of steps toward his door.

"Those who came to it found it locked.

"'What is it, Mr. Solomon,' they cried. 'Open the door.'

"'I can't,' he answered, 'it's locked from your side.'

"Then there was some delay while a key was found to open the door.

"When at last it was thrown open, Solomon excitedly told how he had been robbed and ordered them to send word to the police.

"This had been done the moment his signal was given.

"Although he was terribly frightened, the banker kept his wits and sent word to the Bank of England to cancel all the notes issued to him that morning.

"As perhaps you know, Trim, every bank of England note is numbered, so that it was known exactly what notes had been sent to Solomon.

"The police believed that they should have no difficulty in capturing the robber, for they could send out a list of the numbered notes all through the Kingdom, all over the world in fact, with orders to arrest anybody who should present one of those notes in payment of anything.

"Not fifteen minutes had passed from the time of the robbery to the time when the police were at work.

"It is no wonder, therefore, that everybody believed that Jan would be speedily captured.

"Nevertheless, the plans of the police failed completely and Jan escaped."

"I supposed you would say so," said Trim, "or else you wouldn't have told me the story.

"But how did the Destroyer make any use of his plunder if the notes had been cancelled?"

"I was coming to that," responded Nick.

"It's a very common thing in England for a man to call at a bank with notes and ask to have them changed into gold.

"Now it proved that within ten minutes after the robbery not less than a dozen banks had changed new notes into gold for men who presented them at the counters.

"The numbers of the notes thus exchanged by the dozen different banks were the same as those stolen from Solomon.

"The notes were got rid of, you see, before the police were at work, quick though they were in getting at the case."

"Jan must have had several confederates, then."

"Undoubtedly. That is one of the most interesting features of the case to me.

"The plans were well laid.

"Lombard street is in the very heart of the London banking district.

"You can hardly swing a cat anywhere around there without hitting its head against a bank or a money changer's.

"So you see, it was simple enough for Jan to have his confederates in waiting, in some private room of a restaurant, for example.

"He divided his parcel of notes among them and each one took his share to a different bank and received gold for them.

"You may be very sure that the police made desperate efforts to trace the men who had made the exchanges.

"Probably every man among them was disguised.

"At all events, no trace of any of them was found.

"What became of them could only be guessed.

"Telegrams were sent to every seaport to watch the passengers of outgoing steamships.

"If Jan and his confederates had left England in a body I have little doubt that they would have all been arrested.

"The criminal, however, was too shrewd to make any such mistake as that.

"He and his men went by different routes, where, nobody knows.

"Perhaps they didn't all go to the same place.

"At all events, there's the story that Brodhead sent to me.

"Since that time Jan the Destroyer has not been heard from, but taking the

man's methods into consideration and the fact that a criminal of that stamp seldom lies low for longer than a year, and that Jan always turns up in strange places, it would not surprise me a little bit if you should find that this Puebla business is one of his efforts."

"Well, I must say," Trim responded, "it makes me anxious to get down there and find out about it.

"The English detective was of the opinion that Jan would show his hand next in America somewhere. That was why he wrote me.

"He thought that if I knew all the details of the London case it would help me in stopping the man when he should turn up here.

"Now, you see, Jan hasn't tried anything in New York.

"That probably is because he is shrewd enough to know that we would be forwarned against him.

"It is exactly like him to go to some out-of-the-way spot like a Mexican city and operate there.

"He may be your man, Trim. Pull him if you can.

"I shall be prepared for any sort of surprise, but nothing would surprise me less than to learn that you were on the track of this criminal, who has defeated the police of all Europe."

CHAPTER IV.

THE MULE DRIVER.

A few days later Trim was in Mexico City.

He had arrived there without incident.

It was then afternoon and he was in time to catch the last train for the day to Puebla.

This train was due in Puebla about an hour after sunset.

Mexico is far enough to the South to have short evenings.

There is almost no twilight.

Once the sun sets darkness comes on rapidly.

Therefore, although it was still early, it was as dark as night when Trim's train halted a short distance outside of Puebla.

Trim looked out of the windows, and could see no sign of a station.

It appeared to him that the train had stopped upon the side of a hill that was half covered with forest.

He noticed that other passengers were equally surprised.

Those who were evidently familiar with the line asked each other what was the matter.

Some of them went to the platform and looked up and down the line.

Trim did not stir.

He supposed that there was a hot box along the train somewhere, or that some trifling accident had happened to the locomotive.

In either case he could not improve matters by getting up; so he remained where he was.

Presently the conductor of the train came in and said:

"Ladies and Gentlemen: This train can go no further to-night."

He was interrupted by several voices giving exclamations of surprise and dismay.

"Why not?"

"What shall we do?"

"What is the matter?" cried different persons.

"The matter is," said the conductor when he could make himself heard, "that the bridge crossing the deep ravine just this side of Puebla has burned down.

"There will be no taking a train across it for several days at least.

"Instead of being impatient about it, you ought to think yourselves lucky that we were warned in time to prevent the train from leaping right into the ravine."

"But what shall we do?" cried a woman passenger, hysterically.

"We can't stay here all night."

"There will be no need of it," responded the conductor.

"The railroad company have arranged to send wagons here to take you the rest of the way.

"It is not far.

"If the wagons arrive here soon as we expect they will, you will all be in Puebla City within two hours."

The women looked disappointed and fretful, but the men took the news more calmly.

"How did the bridge catch fire?" one of them asked.

"I know nothing about it," the con-

ductor responded, "but it seems that the fire was discovered not very long after we left Mexico.

"A gang of men was hurried to the place from Puebla on a wrecking train but arrived too late to save the bridge.

"One was sent across the ravine to signal this train.

"The beams of the bridge are still smoking as you can see if you care to go out to the end of the train."

The passengers wondered how the fire had started, and some of them went out to the locomotive to see what they could of the ruins.

Trim went along with these, but got little satisfaction out of the view, for it was too dark to distinguish anything more than a few beams that were smoking and glowing on the hillside below.

While he was trying to get a view of the ruined bridge he felt a touch upon his arm.

Turning, he saw a Mexican of the poorest class.

His feet were bare and his clothes were almost falling from him.

"You ride to Puebla?" this man said in very bad English.

"Me have wagon all ready down below."

He pointed toward the bottom of the ravine.

Trim shook his head and answered in Spanish.

"No, thank you, there are ladies among the passengers.

"Take them first."

"I have as good a wagon as any!" insisted the driver.

"All the more reason," responded Trim, "why you should give the ladies a chance to ride in it."

Having said this, he returned to his car.

He was a little surprised to notice that the driver tagged after him.

He stopped only when Trim stepped upon the platform.

"I'll get you some customers," Trim called to him.

The man did not reply or nod, but there was no doubt that he heard what Trim said.

Trim entered the car and approached a party consisting of two ladies and a gentleman.

"I've just learned," he said, "that a wagon is below here.

"It is probably not one of those sent out by the railroad company, but I should think it would do very well, and from what I know of Mexican wagons it would take you there."

"You are very kind, sir," responded the man who was escorting the ladies.

"If you can make room for us——"

"Oh, excuse me," interrupted Trim, "I'm not thinking of going by that wagon.

"I shan't go until all the ladies in the train have been accommodated."

"Then my wife and sister will be very glad to take advantage of your kindness, sir.

"Will you show us where to find the wagon?"

"I'll show you the driver," Trim answered.

With this, he went back to the platform and looked around for the driver who had spoken to him.

He did not see him.

"I'm afraid he's looking for other passengers," said Trim.

"Just wait here a moment and I'll see if I can find him."

He jumped down and ran along beside the train for its entire length.

Passengers were beginning to get off.

"If that driver had the business sense of an ordinary Yankee," thought Trim, "he could get passengers at his own terms here.

"I guess he hasn't got a very good head for business."

He did not find his driver anywhere, and was a good deal annoyed.

"Why didn't he wait," thought the detective, "when I told him I'd get him some customers?

"I shall feel pretty cheap to go back there and tell that gentleman that there isn't any wagon here for him after all."

Trim made a second trip along beside the train with no better result than before.

He was just about to give it up and go back with the confession that he had spoken of a carriage without knowing what he was talking about, when several

drivers appeared hurrying up the hillside from the bottom of the ravine.

"Carriages to Puebla?" they cried.

"Here you are!" exclaimed Trim, catching one of them by the sleeve.

"I have passengers for you, this way."

It was not the one who had spoken to him, but that did not matter.

It was a driver, and he had a wagon, and Trim was therefore able to make certain that the two ladies could get a conveyance.

It was well for them that he caught this driver as he did, for it proved that there were not enough wagons to go around.

Nearly half the passengers were left without any opportunity of getting to Puebla unless they walked.

It was said that other wagons were on the way, and accordingly those who could not find places upon the first lot waited at the bottom of the ravine for others to come.

Trim had gone down from the train with the gentleman and ladies to whom he had spoken.

As he had tried to secure a wagon for them he wanted to make certain that they obtained one.

So he saw them start for Puebla and then returned to the train for his handbag.

When he scrambled upon the car platform he saw the driver who had first spoken to him standing there.

"Hello," he exclaimed, "what became of you?"

"I was looking for you," the man replied.

"Where?"

"Here, there, all over."

"Nonsense! Were you struck blind?"

"No, I have my eyes, senor."

"Why didn't you wait when I told you I would get you customers?"

"Did you tell me that, senor?"

"Certainly."

"I didn't understand."

"Well, you can find plenty more customers down the hill now."

"But I thought you wanted my wagon, senor?"

"I didn't say I did."

"It is a very good wagon.

"My mule is stronger and faster than most——"

Trim did not wait to hear the man complete his remarks.

He was a little impatient at the fellow for having misunderstood him.

"He acts more like a beggar than a driver," Trim thought as he went into the car.

His handbag was where he had left it upon a seat.

A book that he had been reading was lying upon the window sill.

As he had not finished the book and was interested in it he opened the bag and put the book inside.

This took a little time, but when it was done and he had come to the platform again he found the driver still there.

"Let me carry your bag for you, senor?"

"Well, take it," Trim answered, with a smile.

"I've got to go to Puebla to-night and I've no objection to your taking me there, but you could have got plenty of other customers without waiting for me."

"You were the first one I saw, senor," the man replied, quietly, "and I thought I would like to take you, that is all."

Trim followed the man down the ravine to a place a little beyond where the other carriages had stopped.

The driver's wagon stood beside the road under a big tree.

Trim knew something about Mexican wagons because of his previous experience in that country.

He knew that they were very rough affairs, very uncomfortable and not made for speed.

He was, therefore, not surprised, but rather amused when he found that this wagon was hardly more than a packing box upon two wheels.

He could not see this, for it was too dark, but he could tell by the feeling what sort of a thing it was that he had got to ride into the distant city.

Two or three other men who had not been able to get places upon the first lot of wagons, followed Trim to the tree.

They had seen the driver carrying his bag.

"Isn't there room for one more?" one of them asked.

"There ought to be," Trim responded, who had climbed into the box and was now sitting on his bag, "but I doubt it in this case."

"No," answered his driver, sharply. "There is not room for one more."

With this, he cracked his whip, shouted to the mule and the clumsy conveyance started off.

Trim laughed quietly.

"My driver knew more than I thought he did," he said to himself.

"Nice thing it would have been to ask those ladies to go on to Puebla in this.

"There's hardly room for me and my bag, and as for comfort, well, I'd a little rather be in an easychair."

It was evident from the jolting that the body of the wagon had been nailed on to the wheel hubs and pole.

Trim was getting about the worst shaking up he ever experienced.

As many of the roads in Mexico are very good, he was somewhat surprised at this, but supposed that it was due to the fact that this was a little-used road.

"This probably goes to some farm along the ravine," he thought, "and presently we shall be upon a main road where the riding will be easier."

"I say!" he called out to the driver.

"Well, senor?"

"How far is it to Puebla?"

"A matter of twelve miles maybe by road."

"How far in a straight line?"

"Six, seven, maybe eight."

"Is it this kind of a road all the way?"

"Nearly all the way, senor."

They were now going up a hill.

Trim preferred walking to such an uncomfortable ride and accordingly he got out.

The driver who was seated on the pole of the wagon in front of the box noticed this and got off, too.

"It's not a long hill," he said, "and it'll be more level when we get to the top."

Trim made no reply.

Looking over his shoulder, he could see the glow of the ruined bridge now fully a mile distant.

A moment later this was hidden from view by trees.

After a few minutes they came to the top of the hill and the driver stopped his mule in order to let Trim climb aboard again.

There was a sound of wheels ahead of them.

"More wagons," said the driver, "going to meet the train at the ravine."

This proved to be the case.

Half a dozen of them passed and started down the hill.

Trim climbed back into the box and the driver again sat upon the pole.

The mule was prodded and started forward.

The darkness was now more dense than ever, for they were proceeding through a forest.

Trim could not have told whether there was a road ahead or behind, for it was too dark to see the beaten path.

None of the wagons carried any lights, and he wondered what would happen if they should meet another.

"How can you tell which way to turn?" he asked the driver, for the sake of passing time with conversation.

"The mule knows," was the reply.

"Can he see in the dark?"

"Yes, senor."

"I don't suppose you're trying to guide the beast then?"

"Not at all, senor, he knows the way."

The driver did not seem to be a talkative person, and as nothing he said was very interesting to Trim, the detective soon gave up trying to converse with him.

They went on in silence therefore some distance further.

Then the mule stopped.

Trim had not heard the driver speak to the animal.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

The driver had got down from the pole and was now standing in front of Trim by the wheel.

"You'll have to get out here," said.

"What for?"

"No matter, senor, you'll have to get out."

Trim did not like the tone in which the man spoke.

He made up his mind that he would

not get down until he knew exactly why he did so.

"Get back on to the wagon pole," he commanded, "and take me to Puebla."

Saying this, Trim was getting his fingers upon his revolver.

The words were no more than out of his mouth before something fell over his head and shoulders and closed tightly about his arms.

He was then yanked from his place in the box.

At the same instant there was the sound of a loud slap and the mule bounded forward.

CHAPTER V.

FIVE AGAINST ONE.

The darkness saved Trim from almost instant death.

He understood the attack upon him only too well.

As his early life had been passed in the far West, he had learned the use of the lariat.

He knew how to throw it himself.

More than once in his career as a detective he had made a capture by a clever throw of the rope.

He knew, therefore, that it was a lariat that had descended over his head and shoulders and wound itself around his body.

There is no doubt that it was intended to encircle only his neck.

If that had happened the sudden jerk upon the rope added to the fall given by the starting of the wagon, would have strangled him if it had not broken his neck immediately.

Even in the excitement of the first moment of this attack Trim remembered the custom of lynching parties.

They usually stand their victim upon a wagon under a tree.

The noose is around the victim's neck.

The other end of the rope is tied to a limb overhead.

The wagon is then driven forward so that the victim drops a foot or two, but not far enough to touch the ground.

Trim expected to find nothing under his feet as soon as the mule started. He was not mistaken.

He swung in the air like a big pendulum.

"This is the luckiest thing the night ever did for me," he thought, "for if the rascals could have seen so as to drop this rope under my chin I shouldn't be able to make a fight for my life."

He began at once to make an effort to loosen the rope.

It had settled over his upper arms, but his forearms were free.

He could bend them from the elbows, therefore, and he quickly got the fingers of both hands upon the rope.

This was within a second after the wagon had been driven from under him.

He heard meantime the trampling of many feet near by.

There was a sudden blow upon his chest.

This was accompanied by a slight sound something like a hiss that made his blood run cold.

Lucky for him that it did not cause his blood to leap from his heart in a torrent.

He knew that the sound was caused by a sharp-bladed knife cutting through his clothing.

Again the darkness had saved him.

Some one among these unseen foes had leaped at the spot where he was known to be hanging.

The man had intended to thrust his dagger into Trim's heart.

The darkness prevented him from seeing just where his victim was.

Moreover, Trim was swaying back and forth, and although the man struck him, the knife simply ripped a big gash across Trim's coat and vest.

The blow served another purpose.

It set Trim to swinging harder than before.

The rope was wound so tightly about him that at the first instant his fingers could make no impression upon it.

Then several things happened all at once.

Afterward Trim could never tell which happened first.

There was a blinding flash of light directly in front of him.

It revealed the presence of at least four men.

All wore black masks.

Each carried a knife.

Every one of them had his knife raised.

All four were looking for the swinging body of their victim.

Whoever held the light was made invisible by it.

It was evidently a powerful bull's eye lamp and the man who held it in front of him was completely concealed in the shadow.

At the moment the light flashed, Trim was as far from the four men as the swinging of the rope would let him go.

Instantly he began to swing toward them.

The four leaped toward him with savage cries.

Trim doubled up his knees until they were close to his chest.

Then as he reached the bottom of his swing and the men were close at hand he shot both legs out with all his force.

One foot caught an assailant squarely upon the chest.

The other struck a man in the face.

Both men reeled to one side.

The one who was struck on the chest fell to the ground with a loud gasp.

The wind had been knocked out of him.

That disposed of only two.

The other two were reaching out for him with their weapons.

Trim dropped his fingers from the rope that he was trying to untie, and reached his palms out as far as he could.

He raised his fingers and instantly there was a double report.

Fire and smoke belched from underneath each palm.

With cries of pain, both assailants staggered back.

Trim's swinging had been almost stopped by his collision against the men.

Without giving them any time to recover, he again fired the revolvers concealed in his sleeves.

This time he directed the shots straight at the bull's eye lantern.

The light went out, accompanied by the sound of smashing glass.

At the same instant Trim felt the rope about him beginning to yield.

One twist with his fingers and he was free from it.

He dropped to the ground, and as he did so felt the form of a man directly in front of him.

He had no time to attack or defend himself.

It was now less than half a second from the time when he had smashed the bull's eye lamp. Another shot rang out on the night.

Trim saw the flash.

It could not have been more than four or five feet from him.

The man in front of him dropped to the ground without a groan.

Now that the rope was released from his shoulders Trim could work the mechanism in his sleeves so as to bring his revolvers down where he could clutch them.

It was the work of but an instant to do this.

When he had them in his hands he fired three shots in rapid succession aiming at the place where he had seen the flash of his enemy's revolver.

When the sounds of these shots died away he heard a hurried trampling of feet retreating.

Trim's foes were in flight.

He did not believe himself well out of danger.

Counting the man who held the lantern, there had been five assailants surely.

Perhaps more were lurking near.

If so, they would only be waiting for a sight of him to shoot.

Trim gave a jump to one side.

This brought him as he could tell by the feeling of the ground beneath his feet, to the edge of the road.

A step or two and he stumbled against a large tree.

As he did so there was the crack of a revolver at some distance beyond.

This was followed by a vicious little spat as the ball plowed into the road near where he had been standing.

Trim had seen the flash and reckoned that it must be fifty or sixty feet distant.

He promptly fired in that direction.

He still heard the sound of retreating footsteps, but they were growing fainter.

After listening a moment, he took out his powerful electric lantern, drew the slide and flashed it in the direction of the retreating steps.

He allowed it to flash only an instant, for a glance was all he wanted.

Then he closed the slide and darted behind another tree that stood near.

He hoped by this maneuver to draw the shots of his enemies if any were still lingering near.

No shot came.

Trim concluded that his foes had been dispersed for good.

The glance at his surroundings that he had taken when the light flashed showed that he was in a dense forest.

He had seen the rough cart path with the rope dangling from a limb over it.

He had seen the motionless body of a man lying on the path.

There was nothing beside that except trees.

Trim's heart was beating fast.

He had kept cool during the terrible fight, and everything he had done was done with as much certainty as if he had had minutes in which to aim instead of fractions of seconds.

Now he felt a wave of heat from head to toes.

The perspiration broke out upon his face and ran down in streams.

"Great Scott!" thought Trim, "I should almost think that I was frightened.

"Well, if a fellow is frightened only after the scrap is over there is no harm in it."

He stood a moment or two longer behind the tree.

This was partly to get his breath and partly to satisfy himself that his foes were gone for good.

Then he opened the side of his lantern again and stepped out to the cart path.

The man who was lying there was dead.

Trim raised the black mask from his face and saw that it was his driver.

On his jaw was a bruise that had been made by Trim's boot.

The bullet that had killed him had entered his heart.

Trim looked at the man steadily for a moment.

"I didn't kill you," he said to himself at last, "though that is no fault of my intention.

"It is hardly time for the rope around my upper arms I could have aimed my revolvers better.

"As it is, I believe I must have hit a couple of the fellows for I certainly heard them yell.

"They must have been merely wounded for they were able to get away.

"There is no doubt that my aim was all right at the lantern, and the man who held it was saved by the bullet's taking effect upon it."

Trim searched with his lantern for several yards around the spot.

There were dark spots here and there upon the ground.

These showed undoubtedly that his shots had drawn blood.

Apparently the masked men had been able to get away without leaving anything behind them as clews to their identity except the dead body of their companion.

"Now, then," thought Trim, after he had finished his search, "what is the meaning of all this?

"If I were running down crooks in New York, or in any other city where the Carters are known, I should suspect that this was an attempt of the crooks to do me up.

"It is barely possible that that may be the case now, but it doesn't seem probable.

"It is more likely that this gang is composed of ordinary ruffians who took advantage of the burning of the railroad bridge to commit robbery.

"In that case though why should they single me out among the passengers?

"There is something a little strange too in the fact that they were masked.

"Ordinary highway robbers working in the dark would hardly go to the trouble of masking themselves.

"My driver, too, had put on a mask.

"Queer work.

"Masked men are seen near General Blanco's office after the attempt upon his life.

"Jan the destroyer had a masked confederate when he did his job in London.

"Perhaps I've had a tussle with Jan and his crew.

"Well, there'll be time enough to think about that when I've got to Havana.

"The next thing is to find out how to get there."

CHAPTER VI.

TRIM UNDER ARREST.

At this moment Trim was startled by a rustling near by.

He instantly closed the slide of his lantern and leaped to one side.

Then he stood stock still, with his revolver ready for action.

For a second or so there was no sound.

Then the rustling began again.

It was followed by a heavy step or two.

This was accompanied by a creaking noise.

The detective smiled.

Without hesitation he opened the slide of his lantern once more and went toward the spot whence the noise came.

A few rods from where the fight had occurred he found the clumsy wagon in which he had rode from the railroad.

The mule that had dragged it was now browsing upon the bushes alongside the cart path.

"This is a good find," said Trim to himself.

"Here's my handbag just as I left it and here's a private carriage that will save me walking the rest of the way to Puebla.

"I wonder if the mule knows the way?

"He seems willing enough to go anywhere but I don't believe he's pointed in the right direction.

"This doesn't look like a main road.

"Besides that, the robbers, if that was what they were, wouldn't have made their attempt upon a main road where they were likely to be interrupted by other wagons carrying passengers to Puebla.

"I reckon the correct thing for me to do is to turn the mule around and drive back."

This Trim did.

Before leaving the spot he dragged the body of his driver out of the cart path and covered it with a coarse blanket that he found in the bottom of the wagon.

Then he sat on the pole as his driver had done and told the mule to get up.

The mule got up and ambled slowly along the cart path.

After something like a quarter of an hour had passed Trim was able to see stars overhead.

He had come out of the forest.

He immediately got down opened his lantern and found that directly in front of him was a well traveled road.

Behind was the narrow cart path leading into the forest.

This was where the driver had turned in when Trim was a passenger.

Trim, therefore, mounted the wagon again and turned the mule into the main road heading him in the direction in which he supposed Puebla to be.

His judgment was correct in this matter although it was a long time before he had any reason to feel sure of it.

At length, however, he saw the lights of a town ahead.

It was about ten o'clock in the evening when he entered the outskirts of a large city.

He drove on until he came to a well lighted square.

A number of men were idling at one side.

Trim thought there might be a hotel there and drove over to them.

He soon saw that he was mistaken in that matter.

The men were idling before some kind of a public building, but it was not a hotel.

He stopped his mule in front of them and asked in Spanish that they direct him to the Alcazar.

This is the name of one of the principal hotels in Puebla.

One of the idlers began to answer pointing to a street that led out from the other side of the square.

As Trim listened he noticed that another man in the group started at sight of him and ran hastily away.

"Well, well," thought Trim, "I wonder if that's one of my masked men.

"If so he's doing me a service by running away for that betrays him."

The detective was on the point of jumping from the wagon and making after this fellow when he saw the man stop and speak to a policeman.

Trim, therefore, stayed where he was until the man who had been giving him his directions stopped speaking.

Then he took up the reins in doubt

whether to drive at once to the Alcazar or to remain and keep his eye upon the man who had run away.

He did not have to decide this question.

The policeman to whom the man had spoken came up rapidly and catching Trim's mule by the bit, asked:

"Who are you, and where did you get this animal and wagon?"

"I am a traveler," Trim responded, "and I picked this conveyance up at the railroad some miles north of here."

The man who had spoken to the policeman stood by, showing signs of great excitement.

"I know it is my team, officer," he cried, "and this man is undoubtedly the thief.

"I can prove my property.

"You know I have given a description of it to the chief."

"I know it is yours, Pedro," the policeman answered, "and if this man is not the thief he will have to give a good account of himself.

"Hold the mule, Pedro."

Pedro promptly took his place at the mule's head.

Then the policeman approached Trim, who was waiting with some amusement and curiosity.

Laying his hand upon Trim's shoulder the policeman said:

"You are my prisoner."

"All right," Trim responded, getting down from the wagon.

The policeman blew upon a whistle.

Immediately two or three other officers came hurrying from the building before which they stood.

One of them remained to take care of the mule and wagon.

Another took Pedro by the arm and a third marched beside Trim.

The detective had taken his handbag from the wagon.

Thus they entered the building, which proved to be the police headquarters of Puebla.

Trim was taken into a room where a couple of men sat behind a table.

One was the chief of police and the other his secretary.

"What is all this?" the chief asked, with an expression of surprise.

"My mule," began Pedro, excitedly.

One of the policemen interrupted him.

"This man, chief," he said, "is the farmer Pedro, who reported that his mule and wagon had been stolen late this afternoon.

"He charges this other, whose name we have not yet asked, with stealing it."

The chief looked at Trim, and the expression of surprise on his face deepened.

The detective apparently did not look like a man who would steal a farmer's wagon.

"What evidence is there?" asked the chief.

"The mule and the wagon are outside," responded an officer, and this man was in the wagon."

"Evidence enough to justify an arrest," he muttered, "but rather strange, nevertheless.

"What is your name?"

This question was addressed to Trim.

As soon as he saw that he was to be arrested the detective had begun to debate how he should act under the circumstances.

It had been his plan all along to inform the police of his adventure, but as he still suspected that the affair might be connected in some way with the attempt upon General Blanco he decided not to make his identity known at the start, so he answered promptly:

"John Howard."

"Where do you live?"

"San Antonio."

"Are you a stranger here?"

"I am."

"Never here before?"

"Never."

"How did you come by the wagon?"

"I met the train from Mexico at the ravine where the bridge was burned——"

"Ah! you were one of the passengers on that train, were you?"

"I was."

"That can be proved easy enough," said the chief, "for probably the conductor or some of the train hands would remember you."

There was a moment's pause.

"Well," said the chief, sharply, "go on with your story."

"A man who seemed to own this

wagon," said Trim, "offered to drive me to Puebla."

"Was it this man?" pointing to Pedro.

"No, sir."

"Did you ever see this man before?"

"Never."

"Go on."

"The driver evidently took a wrong road.

"We had some trouble about it and he left me; so I found the right road and came on alone."

"Extraordinary!" muttered the chief.

Then he looked at Trim sharply.

"What's the matter with your clothing?" he asked.

Trim looked down and saw the big rent that had been made by the knife of one of his foes.

"I just said that I had trouble with the driver," he said.

"Clothes like that don't tear easily," remarked the chief.

"Quite right."

"It looks to me as if that was made by a knife?"

Trim made no reply.

"Have you nothing further to say about it?"

"Not at present."

The chief drummed on the table a moment.

"This has a serious look," he said, at last.

"The prisoner must be locked up.

"Hold the farmer also and put his mule in the stable for the night."

"May I send for a friend?" asked Trim, quietly.

"You are acquainted in Puebla, then?"

"Yes."

"Whom do you wish to see?"

"Antonio Perez."

The chief looked surprised and turning to one of the policemen said:

"Go to General Blanco's and ask Perez to come down."

The policeman at once went out on this errand.

"Your highness," cried Pedro the farmer, "must I be locked up?"

"Take him away," the chief responded.

The farmer protested bitterly that all he wanted now that his mule and wagon were found, was to return home, but the officers would not listen to him.

He was led away while another officer prepared to conduct Trim to a cell.

"You may go," said the chief to this officer.

A moment later therefore the room was deserted except by the chief and his secretary and Trim.

"I don't pretend to understand this matter," the chief said then, "but if you are acquainted with Antonio Perez I take it for granted that you can't be guilty of what the farmer charges you with.

"Before Perez comes, however, I should be glad to have you explain further how you came by that cut in your clothing."

"As a matter of fact, chief," Trim responded, "I was set upon by a gang of ruffians in the forest and had to fight for my life."

"I thought we had cleared the country roads of bandits!" exclaimed the chief.

"One of them lies dead at the spot where we had the fight," Trim added.

"Indeed! Then we shall be able to trace the other villains."

"I hope so."

"Did they rob you?"

"No."

"Then you're fortunate.

"But why didn't you explain this before?"

"I thought that after I'd told Perez about the matter it would be easy for you to believe me."

"You had no need to fear," returned the chief, contemptuously.

"I flatter myself that I can read character and I can see that you're not a man to tell an untruth."

"Dear me," thought Trim, "what will the chief say when he finds that I didn't give my name straight?"

Aloud, he said:

"Excuse me for suggesting it, chief, but it seems to me that it would be a good plan to send out a detail of men to bring in the body of my driver."

"Yes—yes!" exclaimed the chief.

"I was just about to do so."

Trim repressed a smile, for he could see that the chief really had not thought of this matter.

There was no delay, however, in getting men started on the errand.

Trim described the place as well as he could, and half a dozen policemen set out to find it.

A little after they had gone two men came into the chief's office.

One was a short dark man with a thin face and nervous, though quiet, manner.

The other was his exact opposite.

Tall, well proportioned and sandy complexion, with a manner as free from nervousness as could well be imagined.

"You sent for me, chief?" the smaller man said.

"Yes, Perez," the chief answered. "We have a friend of yours here."

He pointed toward Trim, who had risen.

Perez looked at the detective wonderingly.

"I——" he began.

"Chief," interrupted Trim, "may I speak with Senor Perez alone?"

"Certainly."

The chief turned to his secretary, who promptly got up and opened the door of a side room.

Trim walked in and Perez followed slowly.

Once within, Trim said:

"My name is Carter, senor."

"Oh, indeed!" responded Perez, with an expression of great relief.

"I hoped that you might come in by the last train from Mexico this evening, although you had not telegraphed me at what time to expect you."

"I meant to come in quietly, but I was prevented, and this is what happened to me."

Trim thereupon gave Perez a brief account of his adventure in the forest.

"Now," he concluded, "I don't want the chief of police to know who I am until after his men have made an investigation of this attack.

"They may find that it was done by ordinary robbers.

"If that is the case I can still remain John Howard of San Antonio.

"If not, I can tell the chief later who I am if that seems to be the best plan.

"Under the circumstances, therefore, perhaps I had better stay here as a prisoner——"

"Oh, that won't be necessary," interrupted Perez.

"Whether you're Howard or Carter won't make any difference.

"I have influence with the chief and if I tell him that I'll look out for you you'll be released at once.

"You would prefer a good room to a prison cell for the night, I suppose?"

"Well, rather."

"Then I'll fix it."

They returned at once to the chief's room.

The tall man who had come in with Perez was seated near the chief's desk chatting with that official.

He moved away as soon as Perez approached.

"I'll arrange it with just a word or two," whispered Perez to Trim.

The latter, therefore, remained at one side while Perez went up to the chief.

The tall man strolled over to Trim and held out his hand with a smile.

Trim took it, wondering what was coming next.

"I'm sure I'm not mistaken," the man said, in a whisper, "in recognizing Mr. Carter in spite of the assumed name of John Howard?"

These words were spoken in English.

"You've got the advantage of me, stranger," returned Trim, stiffly.

"Oh, no! Excuse me, you have the advantage of all of us in shrewdness and daring, for we know your reputation well, Mr. Carter.

"But I will explain myself. I am Arthur Jameson."

Trim did not move a muscle.

"I sent you a telegram," continued Jameson, a little awkwardly, "on the same day that Perez did."

"Really."

"Yes, didn't you receive it?"

"I did not."

Trim answered with perfect truth, for it was Nick who had received the telegram.

"Oh, then I understand your hesitation, Mr. Carter, but I assure you that I'm very glad that you have come to Puebla.

"I'm a business man here and an intimate friend of General Blanco, and I telegraphed you simply to say that all

business men in this city would feel better if you would undertake to capture the man or men who made such a terrible attempt upon his life.

"I was at General Blanco's house——"

At this moment Perez, who had finished speaking with the chief, came up.

"It's all right," he said, "we'll go at once.

"I'm glad to see that you two have been getting acquainted."

"I'm not sure that we have," returned Trim, as they left the room.

"This gentleman claims to know me as somebody besides John Howard of San Antonio——"

"Oh, well," interrupted Perez, "there's no end of any mystery with Mr. Jameson.

"He is one of our closest friends, and has been as anxious as any of the rest of us for your arrival.

"So, Mr. Carter, allow me to introduce you to Mr. Arthur Jameson."

CHAPTER VII.

GENERAL BLANCO'S MESSAGE.

Trim promptly held out his hand.

Jameson took it with the remark:

"I was sure I could not be mistaken."

"I didn't want to admit my identity in the presence of others," said Trim.

"Quite wise, Mr. Carter."

"I should probably have looked you up, anyway before being very long in Puebla."

"Well, you did get my telegram?"

"I saw it."

"It is all right then, and have you come to Puebla with any clew or theory as to this affair?"

"Hardly," Trim answered.

"It would not do for a detective to invent theories three thousand miles away from the scene of operations."

"No, I suppose not, and the first thing you will do will be to acquaint yourself with the details of what has happened, eh?"

"Exactly."

They were walking through the square on which the police station fronted.

Trim was not at all pleased that Jameson had discovered his identity.

It seemed to him that Perez ought to have concealed it if possible.

"Like enough Perez couldn't help himself," thought Trim, philosophically, "and if Jameson is the only man in Puebla who knows that I'm down here it'll be just as well."

"Where are we going?" he asked, after a moment.

"I am taking you to the Alcazar," responded Perez.

"It is one of our best hotels.

"I suppose you would prefer to be there than at General Blanco's house?"

"Oh, decidedly! it wouldn't do to become an inmate of his house.

"The criminals are undoubtedly keeping their eyes on that house and would quickly suspect me if I should stay there.

"I doubt even if I ought to call there."

"I hope you will call," said Perez, "because the general knows that we have sent for you——"

"He is better then, is he?"

"In one sense, yes, in another, no."

"Just what do you mean?"

"He has recovered consciousness, but he cannot speak.

"He seems to understand what we say to him, but he can't make his wishes known."

"Pity!"

"Yes, indeed."

"I don't see why I should call then because if he can't speak I can learn nothing new from him with regard to the explosion."

"True, Mr. Carter, but it is evident to us that the general is anxious to see you, and it would undoubtedly do him a great deal of good to know that a detective is on the ground."

"The general has many callers," suggested Jameson, "and no one would suspect you if you should run up there this evening."

"Isn't it rather late?"

"Not at all, especially as General Blanco seemed to suspect that the summons for Perez to go to the police station mean that you had arrived."

"Well, then I'll go up."

"I'll go along, too," said Jameson, "and show you back to your hotel afterward."

"Very good."

It was but a short walk to the Alcazar, and after Trim had engaged his room and

left his bag there they proceeded on to General Blanco's.

This was a large house a little removed from the business part of the city.

On the way Perez gave Trim more particulars about the explosion at the general's office.

None of them were of great importance.

Trim learned by inquiry that the room over the general's office was a mere attic never used for anything but storage.

At the time of the affair it was supposed to be entirely empty.

Trim asked a good many questions about the general's employees and also got the story of his life.

Mexico has been the scene of more than one civil war and it, therefore, would not have surprised Trim to learn that General Blanco had many enemies.

Although Nick had given him a strong opinion that Jan the Destroyer was the criminal in this case, the young detective had no proof of it as yet, and he was bound to find all the possibilities that might connect others with it.

Perez did most of the talking, although Jameson now and then put in a word of explanation.

Trim paid the strictest attention, but it is not necessary to repeat here any of the facts that they laid before him.

The case developed so rapidly along different lines that the information gained from these two during the walk from General Blanco's house was of little value to the detective.

It was nearly midnight when they arrived. They went straight to the general's room.

A nurse and a physician were at the bedside when they entered.

Trim plucked Perez by the sleeve.

"Can't you get those two out of the room?" he whispered.

Perez nodded.

Going up to the physician, he said:

"There is a gentleman here who has confidential relations with the general; can you leave us alone for a moment?"

The physician frowned.

"I suppose I can," he answered, unwillingly, "but I must return within a minute."

"You may do so."

Accordingly the nurse and physician stepped out.

The other three then approached the bedside.

The general, a dark-complexioned, white-haired man, lay there with his eyes closed.

He opened them when Perez spoke.

"General," he said, "the man whom we sent for and whom you have so much wished to see is here."

General Blanco opened his eyes.

His glance rested upon Jameson.

A strange expression came upon his face.

His eyes fairly bulged.

His pale cheeks became whiter, if possible, than before.

His lips parted and a gurgling sound was heard in his throat.

He was trying to speak, but could not utter a word.

He turned his eyes hopelessly upon Perez.

"Here, general," said Perz, kindly, "here is Mr. Carter; the other is Arthur Jameson, your friend, don't you know?"

The general nodded to show that he understood.

He gave one more glance at Jameson and then turned his eyes upon Trim.

The expression upon his face immediately changed.

There was no mistake that he was greatly relieved.

"I hope to see you in better health, soon, general," said Trim, taking a chair beside the bed.

The general's lips moved, but no sound came forth.

One of his hands was exposed upon the coverlet.

The fingers twitched nervously.

Meantime the general was glancing from Tim to Jameson and then to Perez.

Any one could have seen that there was something he wanted to say.

"You want to tell me something," said Trim, "will you try to write it?"

The general nodded.

Trim promptly produced a pad of paper and a pencil.

General Blanco grasped the pencil eagerly and Trim held the pad firmly.

With a great effort the sick man scribbled upon the pad.

The perspiration rolled down his face as he worked.

Trim could not see what was being written, but he waited with a good deal of anxiety for the end.

Before the message was finished the physician returned.

He looked with a frown of displeasure upon the scene.

"You're exhausting the general's strength," he remarked, in a low tone.

General Blanco apparently heard him, for he shot an impatient glance at the doctor and continued his work.

At last he sighed and the pencil dropped from his fingers.

Trim picked up the pad.

The physician, Jameson and Perez were standing near the foot of the bed.

"What has the brave old man written?" asked Jameson, stepping toward Trim with his hand extended.

Trim tore off the leaf on which the general had written, folded it carefully and put it in his pocket.

"The message was for me," he said, with a sharp glance at Jameson.

The latter colored slightly and halted.

Then Trim turned to the general and said gravely:

"I will attend to it."

General Blanco nodded, gasped, and with another glance full of strange meaning at Jameson, became unconscious.

"This is outrageous!" exclaimed the physician, springing to the sick man's side.

"I was quite certain," he continued, addressing Perez, "that I ought not permit you to annoy him. Such shocks as this may prevent what small chance of recovery there is."

"I'm sorry," began Perez.

"There will be no need to trouble the general again at all events," interrupted Trim.

"I will return at once to my hotel."

Accordingly he started from the room.

Jameson, who had recovered his self-possession, said:

"Shall I accompany you to your hotel, Mr. Howard?"

"If you like," Trim responded.

Jameson followed him from the room.

Perez, with a hasty good-night, remained to help the doctor restore the general to consciousness.

"I suppose you noticed that I called you Howard," remarked Jameson, as they were passing out.

"I thought you would want your secret protected."

"Yes, thanks," returned Trim, gruffly.

"I suppose the general has given you a valuable clew?"

"Very."

"You are more fortunate than the rest of us."

"How so?"

"He hasn't been able to make his thoughts known before since the time of the explosion."

"Indeed!"

"We have not any of us known whom he suspected."

"So?"

"Does he give you an inkling as to the reasons back of the affair?"

"Perhaps."

They had left the house now and were walking rapidly toward the hotel.

"How this man would like to know what's on that paper," thought Trim.

"He's so confoundedly anxious that I've a good mind to let him see it.

"It is perfectly true that General Blanco gave me a clue.

"It was not in what he wrote, but it was in the way he looked at this man, Jameson.

"Now, if I shouldn't show Jameson this paper he'll think that my suspicions are turned straight upon him.

"If I should show it to him he won't know what to think.

"I reckon the best plan will be to mystify him as much as I possibly can and keep him guessing until I get through with the case."

"You prefer to keep your thoughts to yourself, Mr. Carter," remarked Jameson, after a moment.

"Well, usually, but in this case I'm not so sure that I need to."

"I should be very glad to give you any advice or assistance in my power."

"You are very kind."

"I'm so well acquainted with the general's affairs, you know——"

"That perhaps you can explain the meaning of his message to me."

"I thought I might help."

"Very well, here is what he wrote."

They were now in front of the Alcazar.

The light from its windows was sufficient to read by.

Trim took the paper on which the general had scribbled from his pocket and handed it to Jameson.

The latter unfolded it with an appearance of interest, but no sign of nervousness.

The moment he glanced at the paper he gave a start of astonishment.

"Bless my soul!" he exclaimed, "it's meaningless."

"So I thought," responded Trim, quietly.

"I can't make out a word," continued Jameson, "it looks like a baby's scrawl.

"Just a lot of useless marks.

"I thought you said it told you a good deal?"

"Did I?"

"You certainly said something of that kind, but there's nothing on this piece of paper that one could make head or tail of."

"I thought perhaps it was some kind of cipher," remarked Trim, sarcastically, "that you could translate if you are familiar with the general's affairs."

"Nonsense, Mr. Carter," exclaimed Jameson, handing the paper back, "this is absolutely valueless, and it shows that the general's mind is so unbalanced by what has occurred that even if he should say anything it would be valueless as evidence."

"Doubtless," Trim returned.

"Then it was a mere bluff when you said that you had got a clew?"

"Call it that if you like."

"I can't think of anything better to call it than that, Mr. Carter, but I hope you'll succeed in getting something more definite to work upon.

"Good-night."

Trim said good-night, and stood for a moment before the hotel watching Jameson walk away.

There was a queer smile upon the detective's face when at last he entered the hotel.

"The first thing I shall do now," he was saying to himself, "will be to find out all I can about Mr. Arthur Jameson and it's a thousand to one that Mr. Arthur Jameson knows that that is exactly what I'm going to do."

CHAPTER VIII.

JAMESON SEEMS TO BE A WHITE MAN.

Before he went to bed Trim had a conversation with the hotel clerk.

Without appearing to make any inquiries he learned that Jameson was a new comer in Puebla.

It seemed that he was an Englishman who had come to invest in Mexican properties.

He had formed a company of which he was president, called The Mexican Improvement Company.

It was the pan of this concern to buy real estate, invest in mines, build railroads and so on.

The company was so new that there had not been time for it to do much, but a great deal was expected of it, and Jameson stood high in the opinion of the citizens.

This information was satisfactory enough to Trim.

He was more than pleased when he learned that it was less than a year since Jameson had turned up in Puebla.

"It would be great stuff," thought the detective as he went to bed, "to identify him as Jan the Destroyer.

"If he is that man I'll unmask him to a certainty."

Perez called early the next morning.

He reported that General Blanco was in about the same condition as usual.

"He seems more quiet and hopeful," remarked Perez, "but of course that means nothing to us."

"Now, Mr. Carter, what can I do first to help along your investigation?"

There was just one thing that Perez could do for Trim, but the detective did not mention it directly as he did not want his own suspicions to become known, so he said:

"Let's make a call at police headquarters and see what has been found out about the attack upon me in the forest."

So they walked together across the square; on the way Trim said:

"You were not very slow in sending a message to New York about this affair."

"Well," responded Perez, "it was three or four hours after the event before I got my wits together.

"As soon as I did, however, I sent a long cipher dispatch to our consul."

"I suppose you consulted with members of the family or friends about it?"

"Oh, no!"

"Didn't you tell anybody that you were going to send that message?"

"Not a soul."

"Then I suppose you told Mr. Jameson about it later?"

"A day or two later, yes. He introduced the matter himself."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. I'll tell you about it because you might fear that others beside Jameson knew that you had been sent for."

"I did fear that a little."

"You need not, for Jameson is the only one in the secret.

"It was on the evening of the day after the explosion, I think, that Jameson came to me and said that he had a confesson to make.

"He said that he had taken the liberty of asking a well-known New York detective to come down and work up the case.

"I didn't think it would be a very good thing to have two different detectives at work and so I told him that I had already sent for you."

"What did he say to that?"

"He remarked, 'How fortunate, it was Carter that I sent for.' "

"Did you have any further talk about it?"

"Very little.

"I cautioned him to say nothing about your coming and he agreed with me that it should be kept a secret."

This information went far to clinching Trim's suspicions of Jameson.

The message he had sent to Nick appeared to have been written with the knowledge of what Perez had done.

"It was a shrewd move on his part," thought Trim.

"He guessed that Perez would send for us and he took that way of finding out about it.

"That gave him every chance to be on his guard, and I shouldn't wonder if that would account for the attack upon me in the forest."

At the police station they learned that the squad sent out by the chief to search the forest, had found no trace of the driver's body.

They said they had come to a spot where footprints indicated a severe struggle, but there was nothing else.

The chief was greatly disturbed about it and rather anxious that a further investigation should be made.

It was clear that the driver's companions had returned after the fight and taken away his body.

After a little thought on the matter, Trim decided to go out into the forest and make an investigation for himself.

Accordingly, most of the day was spent in this search.

He learned no more than the police had learned.

It was nearing evening when he returned to the city.

As he was walking toward his hotel he saw Jameson turn into the street a little way ahead of him and come toward him.

After a moment, Jameson halted suddenly as if he had thought of something, wheeled about and went rapidly in the other direction.

"He's trying to dodge me," said Trim to himself.

"If that's the case I'll just do a little shadowing."

Accordingly for the next half hour or so Trim dodged Jameson's steps from street to street.

The detective used all his skill in this work, and was satisfied that Jameson was not aware that he was being followed.

At length the suspected man went to the outskirts of the city and approached a granite quarry.

This was a big hole in the side of a hill surrounded by laborer's shanties.

No stone was being cut there at the time.

Jameson disappeared within the quarry and Trim crept up along the hillside to a point where he could look in without being seen.

He felt very triumphant when he saw

the suspected man standing in front of not less than fifty rough-looking men who were listening to what he had to say.

The detective was so near that he could hear every word.

"'I hope you'll not be impatient," Jameson was saying, in Spanish.

"We had expected to begin work by this time, as I told you, but the attempt upon General Blanco's life has delayed us in getting the necessary capital.

"As it doesn't depend entirely upon General Blanco, I think we shall be able to go on in a few days."

"We've got to know something better than that," interrupted one of the men.

"We can't live on air while we're waiting for you to get your capital together!"

"I undertstand that, my friend," responded Jameson, "and, therefore, have arranged to look out for you.

"I can't set you to work until all the capital has been paid in, but until then I will look out for your living.

"I have arranged that you can buy your provisions at certain stores during the next two weeks and have the accounts charged to me.

"Could anything be fairer than that?"

The men seemed to think that this arrangement was better than could be expected.

They gave many signs of satisfaction, and crowded around Jameson to get the list of stores at which they might trade while waiting for work of some kind to begin.

Trim lay in his place of concealment listening and growing more puzzled with every minute that passed.

This kind of talk and action was not what would be expected from Jan the Destroyer.

Even supposing that Jameson were not Jan the Destroyer, it did not seem possible that a man who would treat workmen so generously would attempt to kill a man like General Blanco by dynamite.

"There's something wrong here," Trim said to himself.

"I guess I'm not as smart as I thought I was.

"There are suspicious circumstances against Jameson, but after all, he may be innocent, and this talk with the workmen makes him out to be as honest and straightforward a man as one would wish to meet.

"I don't know what to think about it."

The detective shadowed Jameson back to his lodgings in the city, and then went to dinner at the Alcazar feeling a good deal more puzzled and discouraged than he had at any time since he entered Mexico.

"If I'm on the wrong scent with Jameson," was his thought, "all my time and effort so far have been wasted."

CHAPTER IX.

A LONG WAIT.

Trim was so unsettled by his new thoughts that he hardly knew what step to take next.

During dinner he overheard some conversation about a performance that was to take place at the principal theatre that evening.

It seemed that a very popular actor was to make his last appearance in a play, and that the society people of Puebla had decided to give him a glorious send off.

Seats for the performance had been sold at high prices, and the house was sure to be crowded.

All the wealthy and fine people of the city were to be present.

Trim thought that he would like to take in the show if he had nothing better to do, but he decided not to think of it because he felt that he ought to take the time for studying out a new theory of the case he was working on, or for finding some new facts about Jameson.

He could not easily give up the idea that Jameson was the villain in the case.

The look that the general had given him seemed to speak a great deal.

He was pacing up and down in the hotel office after dinner when Jameson came in.

"Ah, Mr. Car— I beg your pardon, Howard," he said, cheerfully, "I was looking for you."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, are you going to be busy this evening?"

"I am always busy."

"Of course but, I mean have you planned to go anywhere or do anything in particular?"

"No."

"What do you say to taking in the performance at the Casino?"

"I should probably like the show," Trim responded, "but from what I hear, they say that all seats are sold out a week ago and I don't care to stand."

"Of course not, but the thing is going to be such an event that you ought not to miss it.

"I should go myself if I had to be carried on a stretcher."

"Well, I hope you will enjoy it."

"Oh, but that's not the question. I want you to go and I've brought you a ticket."

"Indeed! You're very kind."

"Don't mention it, but go.

"I shall be very much disappointed if you do not."

Saying this, Jameson produced an envelope in which was a theatre ticket and handed it to Trim.

"You'll go, will you not?" he urged.

"Why, yes," Trim responded, "it would be wrong under the circumstances to refuse.

"Is this seat near you?"

"Unfortunately no.

"I'm to be in a box with one of the wealthy families in town with whom I have become acquainted.

"I had bought this seat for myself and then I got the invitation to join this family, so you see I have this ticket on my hands, and unless you use it the seat will remain empty."

"I'll see that it's filled then."

"I am delighted, my friend, and you may be sure that we'll meet during the performance, say between acts."

"I'll look for you, Mr. Jameson."

"You needn't take the trouble, for I shall find you readily, so good-by until then."

Jameson hurried away, leaving Trim standing thoughtfully looking at the theatre ticket.

"I never felt so suspicious in all my life," he was saying to himself, "and yet I can't see that I've any very great ground for it so far as Jameson is concerned.

"His queer action about sending that telegram to Nick may be explained innocently and General Blanco's look toward him may mean nothing at all.

"However, I'd made up my mind that I would study Jameson further and this performance at the theatre will give me the chance.

"I hope my seat is somewhere in the middle so that I can get a view of the private boxes from it."

Trim went to his room to prepare for the theatre.

While there it struck him that he would disguise himself.

This task did not take long and shortly after the doors of the house were opened Trim went in.

He found that his seat was well forward in the orchestra.

From it, therefore, by turning, he could see every private box in the house.

That was satisfactory enough, although he would have preferred a seat a little further back.

People were already entering the private boxes in spite of the early hour.

He saw Jameson with some ladies and gentlemen enter one of the private boxes upon the other side of the house.

After having seated the ladies, Jameson apparently excused himself, for he disappeared.

"Perhaps he's looking for me," thought Trim.

"And as he knows where this seat is and will think it odd that a stranger is here I'll slip out and not occupy it until the performance begins."

Therefore, Trim went out into the lobby.

There he saw Jameson talking earnestly with a man who but a moment before Trim had seen in the orchestra.

The detective did not attempt to overhear what they were saying, but he stood at a little distance watching them narrowly.

After a time Jameson left this man and walked about the theatre, bowing to one and another, but seeming to be in search of somebody.

Standing as he did in front of the incoming crowd, Trim was struck by the number of jewels worn by the ladies.

They had evidently put on their costliest adornments.

"There's an immense fortune," he thought, idly, "in the stuff that's being worn here to-night, if a man could only get his hands on it."

As he was standing there he overheard a part of a conversation between two men.

They were expressing their regret that they had not been able to get seats near together.

"Mine," said one, "is in row D number 14."

"And mine," said the other, "is in the same row but on the other side of the house. Might as well be a mile apart."

"Yes, unless we could exchange with somebody."

Trim's ticket was D 15.

He immediately approached the two and politely suggested that he would exchange with them if it would be of any service.

They gladly accepted his offer and accordingly when the performance began Trim found himself on the side of the house near the private box occupied by Jameson and his friends.

Trim had never seen a more brilliant audience in all his life.

The men were almost as gayly dressed as the ladies.

Some of them wore the national costume of the country, and most all of them had diamonds upon finger rings or shirt studs.

The wealth of the spectators was shown not only in the jewels, but in the wraps carried by the ladies.

These were almost all of very expensive stuff, and beautifully made.

"I reckon," thought Trim, "that if thieves were going around Puebla houses to-night they would not find much that was worth taking."

The perforamnce began on time and for a couple of acts Trim, like the rest, enjoyed it.

The play was new to him and it was well done.

He found that he could keep his attention upon the stage and his eyes somewhat upon Jameson, too, for the latter sat in the very front of his box and did not go out even between acts.

"I'm having a good time out of this, though I don't see that I'm gaining anything," was Trim's thought when the curtain fell at the end of the second act.

Then Jameson arose and looked the house over.

A good many others were standing up, some going out, some going to speak to friends in other quarters.

Presently Jameson excused himself to his companions and left the private box.

"He may be going to look for me," thought Trim, "but I don't believe I care to meet him just now."

So Trim remained in his seat, and for a time.

A good many others were doing the same.

"It's a dreadfully long wait," he heard somebody say behind him.

"Perhaps the stage hands are making the star a presentation behind the scenes," remarked another.

"Then they ought not to take so long about it."

"That's so."

People up in the gallery began to stamp; those downstairs exclaimed, "Hush, hush," and the house immediately became still.

This lasted but a minute or two, however, before the impatient noise in the gallery began again.

Trim looked up at the box occupied by Jameson.

His chair was vacant; everybody else seemed to have returned. Where was he?

The noise in the gallery grew louder.

"Curtain, curtain!" cried a number of voices from boxes behind him.

"Play, play," cried others.

The words were caught up from all parts of the house.

"Curtain! play! curtain! play!" rang out on all sides.

Still the curtain did not budge.

The detective suddenly became very thoughtful.

The scene was no longer amusing to him; it became full of mysterious meaning.

What could be the reason for Jameson's absence from the box when everybody else in the house was in his place?

What caused this delay? What had become of Jameson?

Could it be that Jameson was, after all, the destroyer and——.

Trim's heart seemed to leap to his throat.

He caught a glimpse, or thought he did, of something on the further side of the theatre that sent chills up and down his back.

He was not alarmed, but he was greatly excited.

He strained his eyes in that direction, trying to make certain that what he saw was reality.

He could not be sure; it was under the first balcony that he was looking.

It was dark there; the lights in the main house were burning high, but up there the gallery cast a shadow that made objects seem dim at that distance.

There was certainly the motionless figure of a man there in that dark corner.

And there was a black mask before his face!

CHAPTER X.

SOMETHING NOT ON THE PROGRAMME.

What could this mean?

Nothing, except something awful and terrible.

The man in the mask was but the sign of an event that was to follow.

Was it not a hint that Jan the Destroyer was at work?

Trim sat stock still for a moment, but the perspiration was starting from every pore.

How could he prevent the crime that was about to be enacted?

What the crime was he did not care to guess.

It must mean something terrible.

He thought of leaving his seat at once to warn the police! Then he reflected how useless that would be at this late hour.

A plan that was so far along as to admit of a masked man in the theatre would not be prevented by any such means.

The detective was certain that he would find it impossible to leave the house. Still, something must be done.

Just then the noise of conversation and impatient calls broke into a storm of genuine applause.

The curtain was rising.

The show, therefore, was about to go on.

All the spectators, except the detective, believed that the favorite actor would appear before them in the third act of the play.

Trim was prepared for anything but that.

The curtain rose on an empty stage; all those who were familiar wth the play, and that meant most of the audience, were surprised at this.

A low chorus of exclamations ran over the house.

"What does it mean?" people said to each other.

"Something certainly has happened!"

"Perhaps the star has been taken suddenly ill and the manager will now come forward and explain."

Fully a half minute passed while the people stared at the empty stage.

The musicians were not in their places; no actor appeared.

Presently a tall man stepped from the upper entrance on the stage and walked slowly toward the footlights.

He had on a long black coat; there was a revolver in each hand and upon his face was a black mask.

Trim was the only one in the great audience who realized instantly what this meant.

The others, even those who were familiar with the play, supposed that it was some part of the show.

"There's been a change made in the play, just for to-night," they whispered to each other.

The masked man on the stage came slowly forward and stopped when he was exactly in the middle and close to the footlights.

There he paused for a few seconds in silence.

The people waited breathlessly for him to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began.

Trim turned hastily toward the box, where Jameson had sat.

He did not need to do so; he knew that Jameson's seat was vacant, for he recognized the voice of the speaker.

The great audience became more profoundly hushed and the man on the stage proceeded.

"You expected to see the third act of this play," he said, "but the play will not go on.

"Not one of the actors in the cast is able at this minute to come before the public.

"Everyone of them is bound and gagged and locked in his dressing room.

"The musicians are bound and gagged, and locked in their practice room beneath the stage.

"All the stage hands have been provided for in a similar way."

The was an excited rustling in the audience. Women and men, too, gasped with fright.

Several rose as if they would leave the house.

"Stop!" thundered the man in the mask.

He raised both weapons.

"I shall fire indiscriminately into the crowd," he cried, "until I have emptied every one of the chambers in this revolver, if I see an attempt on the part of any one of you to leave your seats."

There were shrieks and moans from various parts of the house.

Women lost all control of themselves.

After a moment, however, they became quiet, and all who had started to go sat down hastily.

"The entertainment is not over," resumed the masked man, "but the next act will be one in a new play of my own making.

"The performers are among you."

These words were evidently a signal to the villain's confederates.

They were no sooner uttered than from every dark corner in the theatre a masked man darted.

Several came down each aisle from the back and stood at various places in the orchestra.

Each of these men carried what looked like a black cloth over his arm.

They went to places that evidently had been assigned to them beforehand and stood stockstill waiting for the next signal.

"The play I have arranged for your entertainment," continued the speaker, smiling, "is called 'plunder.'

"Fortunately for its success about all the wealth of Puebla is gathered here tonight.

"Everybody in the theatre is to take part in my play.

"Plunder includes everything from diamonds to pocketbooks and lace handkerchiefs.

"My fellow actors, who you see scattered about the house, will receive your contributions."

"Never!" cried a stern voice near Trim.

The detective glanced at the box where Jameson had been sitting.

One of the men there had risen and was shaking his fist at the man on the stage.

"I know your voice," he cried, "you shall not play any such dastardly trick.

"You are Arthur Jameson——"

"I am Jan, the Destroyer," interrupted the man on the stage, aiming one of his pistols at the man in the box.

"I am a dead shot at this distance, and if you don't sit down I'll kill you where you stand!"

A shudder of horror ran over the house.

The man in the box sat down at once.

"If you don't understand it now," continued Jan, addressing the whole audience, "I'll try to make it clear to you that this theatre is held up.

"The ushers and officials in front of the house are taken care of just like the people on the stage.

"The doors are barricaded.

"No words can be got to the police before we finish our work, and if that work is not finished to our satisfaciton dynamite will destroy this place more effectively than it destroyed the office of General Blanco last week."

Many a woman fainted at this terrible speech.

Others with hysterical cries began to remove their jewels and lay them upon the box rails in front of them.

Jan gave a signal to his masked confederates.

They promptly took the cloths from their arms, which proved to be big bags, and began to load them with loot.

"To your work," cried Jan, "and let it be understood that at any sign of disturbance at the house I shall fire.

"My first shot will be taken at the man sitting in orchestra row D, No. 15."

A gasp of terror came from the person occupying that seat.

Of all those in the house Trim alone knew what that meant.

"I've got to act now or never," he thought, "or an innocent man will be killed in my stead.

"I see now why Jameson insisted on my going to the theatre.

"He was sure then to have me where he could get at me.

"He knows the seat where he supposes I am sitting; if any of these people make an attempt to resist the man with whom I exchanged seats will be killed instantly."

There did not seem at that moment any chance that the people in the theatre would resist.

They were spellbound, paralyed with fear.

There was good enough reason for it.

The man on the stage evidently meant business and he stood where every person in the audience was in view.

Every man felt that if he stirred he himself would be shot.

Trim had had his fingers upon his revolver from the moment when Jan appeared, but he had not seen his opportunity yet to use it.

Jan continued:

"I want the man in D 15 to stand up."

With a muttered appeal for mercy, the man with whom Trim had exchanged [illegible]

"[illegible] disguised, Mr. Carter," said Jan, "but you can't deceive me.

"I know that you're the one person in this audience who would dare to shoot, and you're probably the only one here who is armed.

"Therefore, I tell you that I shall pick you first——"

There was a sharp report from the other side of the house.

Jan threw both arms up into the air, [illegible] and fell full length.

Instantly the theatre was in an uproar.

While Jan had been addressing the man in D 15, Trim had quietly risen from his place at the other end of the row and [illegible] at the assembled.

The men who were at work with the bags turned toward the stage to see what their leader would say.

He lay there writhing; no help could come from him.

His confederates were panic stricken; they needed a leader to help them.

Without him they knew not what to do, but each man of them believed it necessary to fly for his life.

They dropped their bags and began to scramble toward the stage.

Trim was ahead of them.

The minute he had fired, the people near him had shrunk away, fearing that Jan would immediately fire back in their direction.

Consequently Trim had a clear passage to the stage, except for the few rows of orchestra chairs.

He bounded over these, leaped into the place where the musicians usually sat, and dashed down the steps that took him under the stage.

The door at the bottom of the steps was locked, but he burst it open with one assault.

Lights were burning dimly there and over at one corner he saw a flight of stairs leading upward.

He ran to these and found that they brought him to the level of the stage and near the promptor's position.

A great number of tubes and signal bells were there.

One was marked "police." Trim pressed his finger upon this.

Almost immediately he heard a voice, saying:

"Hello, what's up?" at his elbow.

Turning, he saw the mouth of a speaking tube, he recognized the voice as that of the chief of police.

The chief was speaking to him from headquarters.

Trim shouted into the tube:

"Send all your force to the Casino in a hurry!

"The theatre is held up.

"Batter down the doors!

"I will keep the scoundrels here, if possible, until you come!"

Then Trim leaped upon the stage.

Jan the Destroyer lay where he had fallen; the mask had slipped from his face.

He glared savagely at Trim, but the detective paid no attention to him.

The house was in the wildest confusion.

The men who had been carrying the bags for plunder, not being familiar with the theatre, or wishing perhaps to get out quicker, had not gone through the musician's place to the steps beneath the stage, but were trying to clamber upon the stage from the front.

Only one man had succeeded in getting to the stage when Trim arrived there.

The detective gave this man a right-hander that sent him back into the orchestra.

Shrieking and screaming arose from all parts of the house.

Trim fired his revolver into the air to attract attention.

Almost instantly the house quieted, for everybody expected a second attack upon [illegible].

Only the men with black masks were rushing around hoping to get out of the place that they themselves had barricaded.

"No harm will come to the decent people in this place," shouted Trim, "but the first man with a mask who makes another move will get a bullet in his heart!"

The words were heard and understood.

The villains who had been under Jan's leadership stood till.

Trim now stood as Jan had a few minutes before, with a revolver in each hand.

"There is no longer any cause to fear," he said, "excepting to those who are acting under orders of Jan, the Destroyer.

"I will certainly shoot any of them as I have shot him if he moves his head."

"Can we pass out of the theatre?" asked a man at the back.

"You can if the doors are open; if not I advise you to batter down the [illegible]; but the police will be here in a moment."

[illegible]

[illegible] hammering from in front and shortly after a large detachment of police forced their way into the theatre and arrested all of Jan's gang.

The leader proved to be mortally wounded.

He made no confession, but several of his confederates told the whole story of the great plot.

The attempt upon Blanco's life had been made by Jan because he had tried vainly to induce Blanco to join the conspiracy.

The general had refused indignantly and Jan had, therefore, tried to put him out of the way for fear of exposure.

Then when Jan knew that a detective was coming from New York he made a great plan for capturing him.

His first step was to burn the railroad bridge so as to stop the detective at a point distant from the city.

Jan himself in disguise was at the ravine when the train stopped.

It was not difficult for a man as shrewd as he was to pick out Trim as the detective.

"He, therefore, pointed him out to the driver, who managed as has been described to get Trim as a passenger.

The attack in the woods followed, Jan being the one who held the bull's eye lantern.

Later, when Jan knew that Trim was suspicious of him, he had ordered all his Confederates to assemble at the quarry the outskirts of the city.

Then pretended to dodge Trim in order to induce the detective to follow him.

Knowing that Trim was within hearing he had then made his "honest" speech to his Confederates whom Trim supposed to be ordinary workmen.

There was little else to be explained, for the great plot to rob all the wealthy people of Puebla had failed.

When the story of the event at the theatre was told by Perez to General Blanco, the general was so excited that he sat up in bed and began to talk rapidly, telling how he knew that Jameson was the one who had tried to kill him by [illegible]mite.

The shock of this excitement was not enough to cure his paralysis, but it did

loosen his tongue, and he recovered sufficient strength to look forward to many years of comfortable life.

Having finished his work Trim wished to return at once to New York, but he was not allowed to leave Puebla before a mass meeting of citizens had passed resolutions of thanks to him and had presented him with a magnificent purse in payment for his services.

[THE END.]

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